

## Journal of Retracing Africa

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Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 15

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January 2016

Kinyanjui, Mary N. Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: From the Margins to the Centre. London: Zed Books, 2013. 140pp.

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### Recommended Citation

Chachage, Kristeen. "Kinyanjui, Mary N. Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: From the Margins to the Centre. London: Zed Books, 2013. 140pp." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2015): 99-101. <https://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol2/iss1/15>

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**Kinyanjui, Mary Njeri. *Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: from the Margins to the Centre*. London: Zed Books, 2014, x + 140 pp.**

Setting out a critique of Western urban planning models as applied to African cities, while recognizing not only the positive contributions of economic informality but also articulating its indigenous characteristics, and at the same time asserting women's agency and dynamism as a basis for new models in advancing urban growth is ambitious for such a slim volume, yet is precisely what Mary Njeri Kinyanjui's incisive observation and analysis achieves in this concise, groundbreaking work.

The subtitle of the book, "*From the Margins to the Centre*," captures the essence of Kinyanjui's enterprise. Through an in depth case study of Nairobi, Kinyanjui sets out to reposition the African city as a unique, coherent entity as opposed to an inexplicable aberration on the margins of urban planning theories. At the same time, she re-conceptualizes economic informality from a site on the edges of survival to a site of dynamism and sustainable solidarity built on indigenous concepts. She embodies all of this in the movement of women, spatially and entrepreneurially, from the edges of the city to its center, in a rejuvenation of the central business district through ingenious new uses of retail space by small scale women traders.

The book, in Kinyanjui's own words, "urges the need to investigate the diversity and creativity within the African city in terms of the African indigenous market concept, solidarity entrepreneurialism, inclusion of women in urban planning and collective organization as a method of organizing business, ... [and] including gender in the construction of urban theory" (5). The author's emphasis on the dynamism and promise of innovations stemming from economic informality and particularly from women in this sector, stands in contrast to much urban planning theory and development literature.

Although not formally divided, the book may be said to fall into three sections. The first and last chapters articulate Kinyanjui's position in relation to other development and urban planning theorists. In chapters two through four, Kinyanjui delves into historical and archival records to trace the development of the city from its colonial inception, through independence and successive post-independence administrations. Aspects addressed include spatial segregation, men and women's place in the city over time, as well as the changing relationship between government officials and street hawkers. Throughout, Kinyanjui stresses the continuity in the development of the informal economic sector, including its roots in indigenous market concepts, which are explicitly elucidated. In this way, Kinyanjui's treatise brings the postcolonial school of thought to the field of urban

planning, insisting that the social and historical context of a city's development be considered in any evaluation or development of future plans. This also forms a basis for Kinyanjui's unabashed critique of the inadequacy of Western theories of urban planning for Africa's context, and her call for the innovations employed in economic informality to be recognized for their contribution to the development of the city's human capital and studied for new urban development paradigms.

Kinyanjui shifts to an analysis of empirical data, gathered from surveys and interviews of Nairobi women in economic informality, in chapters five through eight. This analysis is thematically organized, including chapters on "women's mobility," the "characteristics of women in economic informality," "women's search for spatial justice," and "women's collective organizations," respectively. Kinyanjui is conscious about allowing "subaltern" women's voices to come through in her work. In this section she also formulates a critique of the women's movement of the 1980s and 1990s in Kenya, by highlighting the intersection of class and culture, and alleging "modernist" formulation of the women's movement failed to engage the majority of Kenyan women coming from less middle class or Western-influenced backgrounds. She suggests that women in the informal economic sector are forming a new movement, which has not yet been recognized in academic discourse; an intriguing position that merits further study.

Kinyanjui's data on women in economic informality brings to light a significantly different picture of the sector than that found in other studies in terms of demographics and sustainability. Significantly, she asserts: "The movement [toward women's economic accumulation] is not haphazard, as envisioned in the literature on the impact of informality in the city; it is discussed and coordinated" (110). Kinyanjui's analysis of women's collective organizations gives rise to several exciting possibilities: from the potential for solidarity entrepreneurialism and existing women's groups to form a basis for addressing participation and spatial justice in the city, to a view of collective entrepreneurial organization as a challenge to individualistic, concentrated capitalism. Kinyanjui, suggested that rather than being mainly conceptualized in relation to land reform, one must focus on recognition of emergent social alliances.

A slight tendency to essentialize women operating in economic informality in some sections of the book is overcome when the empirical data and extensive quotes from women themselves are shared in later chapters. One might have wished for enhanced editing to avoid occasional repetition in the manuscript, but overall, *Women and the Informal Economy in Africa* makes important contributions to theories of urban planning, spatial justice, indigenous entrepreneurialism, and gender studies; accordingly, it will appeal to scholars and practitioners in a range of fields.

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